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ABSTRACT

A survey among Indochinese refugee household heads in Illinois investigated (1) relationships among indicators of socioeconomic, psychosocial, and sociocultural dimensions of adjustment; and (2) the effect of length of residence in the United States on these indicators. The indicators included measures of feelings of alienation and self concept in the new environment; differences among the subjects' perceptions of themselves, of other Indochinese, and of other Americans; English language proficiency; extent of American media use; number of American friends; membership in American organizations; socioeconomic and employment status; receipt of welfare payments; and car and home ownership. In general, (1) the most alienated refugees had negative self concepts and saw themselves and other Indochinese as different from other Americans; (2) English proficiency was positively correlated with media use and number of American friends; (3) lower socioeconomic status was predictive of greater alienation; greater differences among perceptions of self, other Indochinese, and other Americans; negative self concept; fewer American friends; poorer English proficiency; and less media use; (4) English proficiency was positively correlated with self concept and negatively correlated with alienation; and (5) length of residence in the United States significantly affected all the variables examined. (Author/MJL)

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Empirical Dimensions of Adjustment Among the Indochinese Refugees

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EMPIRICAL DIMENSIONS OF ADJUSTMENT AMONG THE INDOCHINESE REFUGEES

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The transition to a new cultural environment affects virtually every aspect of human adjustment for both refugees, who are compelled to leave their native land for social, political or religious reasons, and for other immigrants, who willfully and intentionally plan their migration to improve their existence in substantive ways. What compounds the adjustment difficulties of refugees, however, is that they must not only envisage and adapt to changes in language, customs, and behavior as do other immigrants, but they must frequently do so while enduring the stress, grief, and separation attendant to their emigration (Liu, 1979; Nicassio, 1982). So it has been with over 500,000 Indochinese and numerous other ethnic minorities who have sought refuge in the United States over the past seven years.

Understanding the processes of adaptation of refugees to the host culture is important for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, the adjustment of refugees raises vital questions regarding both the nature and extent of human adaptability in the face of a dramatic, stressful, and frequently all-emcompassing change in the physical and interpersonal environment. On the practical level, it is essential to understand the adaptation of refugees since the host culture may be able to act more intelligently in facilitating their transition to the new cultural setting. Hence, the study and analysis of the adjustment of refugees represents a formidable challenge to both researchers of acculturation and social service providers alike.

The Present Research

This paper is based on the findings of a large empirical study of the psychosocial adaptation of the Indochinese in the state of Illinois (Kim and Nicassio, 1980). Two major issues will be addressed in this presentation: (1) the relationship among variables within and between socio-economic, psychosocial, and sociocultural dimensions of adjustment, and (2) the effect of length of residence in the United States on the most salient indices of these dimensions of adjustment.

METHOD

Subjects and Procedures

The data collected in this investigation are based on the responses of 460 Indochinese heads of household representing the Vietnamese, Laotian, H'mong and Cambodian ethnic groups. Subjects were interviewed in their homes by field workers of their same ethnic group. All interviews were conducted in the native language of the respondent. The field workers asked the refugees several questions regarding sociodemographic aspects of their living situation in the United States and their psychological and social experiences in adapting to American culture.

The vast majority of the subjects were relatively young, male residents of the city of Chicago or its suburbs. Those interviewed constituted a portion of a sample of respondents who were involved in a comprehensive refugee needs assessment research project conducted throughout the state (see Table 1 for demographic data).

Measures of Adjustment

Psychosocial Adaptation. This paper will concentrate on four principal

measures of psychosocial adaptation which were designed specifically for the project. In the main, these measures emphasized the nature of the refugees' perception of the new cultural environment and their relationship to it. A ten-item Alienation Scale (A-scale) which measured feelings of social isolation, cultural estrangement, powerlessness, and despair was included in the study (Reimanis and Posen, 1980; Seeman, 1975; Tomeh, 1974). The central theme of this instrument was that of separation, or the feeling on the part of the refugee of emotional and cognitive detachment from the external social environment. In addition, a Self-Perception Scale (SP), which consisted of eight items dealing with both affective (e.g., tense, happy) and characterological dimensions of personality (e.g., humble, patient) was employed. A team of 4 bilingual translators representing the four ethnic groups in the study agreed that the eight adjectives in the scale tapped salient (as opposed to neutral) dimensions of personality in their respective cultures. Two other measures, a Self-American Difference score (SAD), based on the discrepancy between summed ratings on individual items on the Self-Perception Scale and the ratings of other Americans on the same items, and an American-Indochinese Difference score (AID), based on discrepancies between perceptions of Americans and other Indochinese people on these items, were also used as indices of psychosocial adaptation on the premise that perceptual similarity would be a predictor of other positive aspects of adjustment. The alpha reliability coefficients of the Alienation, Self-Perception, SAD, and AID measures were .75, .73, .79 and .79, respectively. Substantial internal consistency was thus demonstrated for each measure.

Sociocultural Adjustment

In a global sense, the variables in this dimension of adjustment assessed the extent to which refugees either participated in, or felt involved with, the American social and cultural arena. Two of these variables, subjective English language Proficiency (EP) and Media Usage (MU), were ascribed primary importance in the present investigation. The English proficiency measure consisted of the summed responses to four items reflecting the extent of daily conversation in English, difficulty in comprehending Americans' speech, difficulty having Americans comprehend the respondent's English, and the degree of hesitation by the respondent to speak to Americans due to anticipated problems in language comprehension. The Media utilization index was also a composite score derived from responses to four questions which asked respondents to indicate their frequency of radio listening, newspaper reading, TV viewing in general, and TV news viewing in particular. Other variables in this dimension included the number of American acquaintances and friends of the respondent, and the number of American organizations of which the respondent was a member (e.g., church, PTA).

Socioeconomic Adjustment

In assessing this dimension of adjustment, the major objective was to achieve an understanding of the overall economic well-being, and the degree of economic self-sufficiency, of the respondents. A two-variable index of socioeconomic status (Education + Income), as well as questions on employment status, the receipt of welfare payments, and car and home ownership, were employed as indicators of the socioeconomic adjustment of the refugees.

RESULTS

Relationship Among Adjustment Variables

Tables 2 through 5 depict relationships within and between psychosocial, sociocultural, and socioeconomic dimensions of adjustment. A number of interesting and highly significant relationships emerge from these data. Within the psychosocial realm (Table 2), it is clear that the refugees' experience of alienation from the host culture was very significantly associated with self-perception and the degree to which they saw themselves and other Indochinese as being different than Americans. Specifically, those who were most alienated tended to have a negative self-perception and to see themselves and other Indochinese as very different than American people. The rather marginal relationship between SAD and SP ($r=-.21$) indicates that (1) refugees who had a negative self-perception were not necessarily whose who saw themselves as different from other Americans, and (2) both measures contributed a substantial amount of unique variance in explaining alienation.

Within the sociocultural dimension, the findings in Table 3 reveal that subjective English language proficiency was strongly associated with American media consumption ($r=.53$). and marginally, yet significantly related to the number of American acquaintances and friends reported by respondents ($r=.20$). The relationship between English Proficiency and Media Usage possesses considerable face validity since at least a modicum of facility in English is necessary for comprehension of information transmitted via TV, radio, or newspaper reading. Somewhat surprisingly, however, none of the variables in Table 3 was significantly related to reported membership in American organizations.

A matrix of interrelationships between the three dimensions of adjustment is illustrated in Tables 4 and 5. The importance of socioeconomic status as a predictor of other adjustment variables is strongly supported. Lower socioeconomic status was predictive of more alienation, greater perceived Self-American, and Indochinese-American differences, a negative self-perception, fewer American acquaintances and friends, poorer English proficiency, and less usage of American media. Thus, the burdens of acculturation and psychosocial adaptation were more severe for those who were of lower socioeconomic status in this population. This finding is consistent with the results of other investigations which have documented a relationship between poverty, anomie, and adaptational problems in migrating populations (Wittkower and Dubreuil, 1973).

Highly significant relationships between Alienation, Self-Perception, English Proficiency and Media Usage are presented in Table 5. Both English Proficiency and Media Usage were negatively correlated with alienation, as anticipated, and positively correlated with Self-Perception. However, when partialing out the effect of English Proficiency, the relationships between Media Usage and Alienation and Self-Perception were no longer significant. Hence, English Proficiency was the key sociocultural variable which was predictive of psychosocial adjustment.

The interrelationships between variables measuring the three dimensions of adjustment were also explored through canonical analysis (Cooley and Lohnes, 1962). This procedure yielded canonical correlations of .74, .73, and .71 between canonical variates measuring the relationship between socioeconomic and psychosocial adjustment, socioeconomic and sociocultural adjustment, and psychosocial and sociocultural adjustment, respectively. Thus,

these finding indicate a very high, and approximately equal, degree of interdependence between the three adjustment dimensions.

Relationship Between Length of Residence in U.S. and Major Adjustment Variables

Length of residence in the new cultural environment is critical to the adjustment of immigrants since cultural learning is a time-dependent phenomenon. Better adjustment would be predicted as greater opportunities for economic self-sufficiency, language learning, and social interaction emerge over time.

Therefore, the relationships between length of residence in the United States and four key adjustment variables, SES, Alienation, Self-American Difference, and English Proficiency were examined in the present study. Figures 1 through 4 provide a graphical representation of the significant impact of time on these different adjustment indices. One-way analyses of variance conducted across the six time categories on these variables all yielded a significant effect due to length of residence (All F's significant at $p < .01$). Gradual increments in socioeconomic status and English Proficiency, and a decrease in alienation, are exemplified with greater intervals of residence in the United States. The Self-American Difference measure shows a somewhat different relationship with time in that scores are much higher within the first six months of residence, while decreasing precipitously during the next six months, and leveling off thereafter. The very dramatic perceptual difference observed during the first six months may be a reflection of the "shock" or acculturative stress that refugees experience after suddenly finding themselves in a new and perhaps incomprehensible cultural environment (Brislin, 1981).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Individual adjustment to a different cultural environment requires gross changes in human adaptation which may be examined from socioeconomic, psychosocial, and sociocultural levels of analysis. This research has shown a very significant degree of interdependence among dimensions of adjustment in an Indochinese refugee sample which had immigrated to the United States subsequent to the Southeast Asian war. The significant interrelationships found between the socioeconomic, psychosocial, and sociocultural areas reflect both the complexity of the process of adaptation itself and concrete realities inherent in the everyday existence of refugees who, during the process of acculturation, may find numerous facets of their life in the host culture to be inextricably linked. For example, it is possible that as refugees develop facility in English, other socioeconomic and sociocultural aspects of their adjustment may also improve, thereby enhancing their perception of the social environment, and of themselves. In the present study, refugees with greater English proficiency tended to have a higher socioeconomic status, to consume American media more extensively, to feel less alienated from American culture, to have a better self-perception and to perceive themselves as more similar to other Americans. An identification of the precise causal mechanisms through which such variables are linked, however, requires greater theoretical refinement of the construct of acculturation itself and empirical studies of adaptation which have a longitudinal focus.

From a human services standpoint, it is absolutely vital for those involved in facilitating the resettlement of the refugees to be aware of the matrix of interrelationships between areas of adjustment in order that a

greater appreciation of the diverse needs of refugees may be realized, and more effective programs may be developed. In particular, social and community service models which foster reciprocity and cross-fertilization among different areas of service delivery should be favored over those which promote compartmentalization and fractionation of services to refugees and their families. This approach is consistent with the recognition that the adjustment of refugees takes place within an ecological system in which changes in socioeconomic, psychosocial, and sociocultural areas are likely to have interactive and reciprocal influences.

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TABLE I

Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Indochinese Sample

		N	%
Ethnicity			
1	Vietnamese	132	29.1
2	Laotian	145	31.9
3	H'mong	91	20.0
4	Cambodian	86	18.7
Education			
1	No Formal Education	32	7.0
2	Elementary School	150	32.6
3	Junior High School	99	21.5
4	High School	65	14.1
5	Some College	69	15.0
6	College Degree	20	4.3
7	Graduate Education	7	1.5
Income (Monthly for Household in $)			
1	<400	102	22.2
2	400 - 700	113	24.6
3	700 - 1000	104	22.6
4	1000 - 1300	44	9.6
5	1300 - 1600	20	4.3
6	1600 - 1900	16	3.5
7	1900 - 2200	8	1.7
8	>2200	7	1.5
Employment			
1	Full-time	261	56.7
2	Part-time	26	5.7
3	Unemployed	158	34.3

Table 1 (continued)

		N	%
Place of Residence			
1	Chicago	182	39.6
2	Suburb of Chicago	186	40.4
3	Outlying areas	74	16.1
Religion			
1	None	11	2.4
2	Buddhism and Ancestor Worship	173	37.6
3	Ancestor Worship	29	6.3
4	Animism	11	2.4
5	Buddhist	142	30.9
6	Catholic	38	8.3
7	Protestant	37	8.0
8	Other	4	.9
Length of Residence in US			
1	<6 months	105	22.8
2	6 months to 1 year	80	17.3
3	1 to 2 years	61	13.4
4	2 to 3 years	56	12.4
5	3 to 4 years	70	15.3
6	>4 years	69	14.9

TABLE II

Correlations Among Psychosocial Variables

	Alienation (A)	Self-Perception (SP)	Self-American Difference (SAD)	American-Indochinese Difference (AID)
Alienation	-	-.514**	.452**	.325**
Self		-	-.210*	-.159
Self-American Difference			-	.815**
American-Indochinese Difference				-

* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .001$

TABLE III

Correlations Among Sociocultural Variables

	English Proficiency (EP)	Media Usage (MU)	American Acquaintances (ACQ)
English Proficiency	-	.534**	.196*
Media Usage		-	.170*
American Acquaintances			-

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

TABLE IV

Correlations Between SES and Psychosocial and Sociocultural Variables

	A	SP	SAD	AID	EP	MU	ACQ
SES	-.520**	.384***	-.317***	-.219*	.606***	.458***	.274**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

TABLE V

Correlations Between Psychosocial and Sociocultural Variables

	EP	MU	ACQ
A	-.552**	-.382**	-.192*
SP	.440**	.497**	.187*
SAD	-.205*	-.190*	-.027
AID	-.124	-.216*	-.077

*p $<$ .05, **p $<$ .001

TABLE VI

Length of Residence in U.S. and Key Adjustment Variables

	<6 mo.	6mo.-1yr.	1-2 yrs.	2-3 yrs.	3-4 yrs.	4yrs.	F	P
SES	3.91	4.88	5.85	5.94	7.77	8.02	40.25	<.001
Alienation	27.41	25.96	25.40	26.58	22.70	20.82	22.90	<.001
Self-American Difference	13.37	7.58	7.81	7.57	8.23	7.82	5.73	<.001
English Proficiency	6.48	7.93	9.36	9.36	12.40	11.79	40.57	<.001

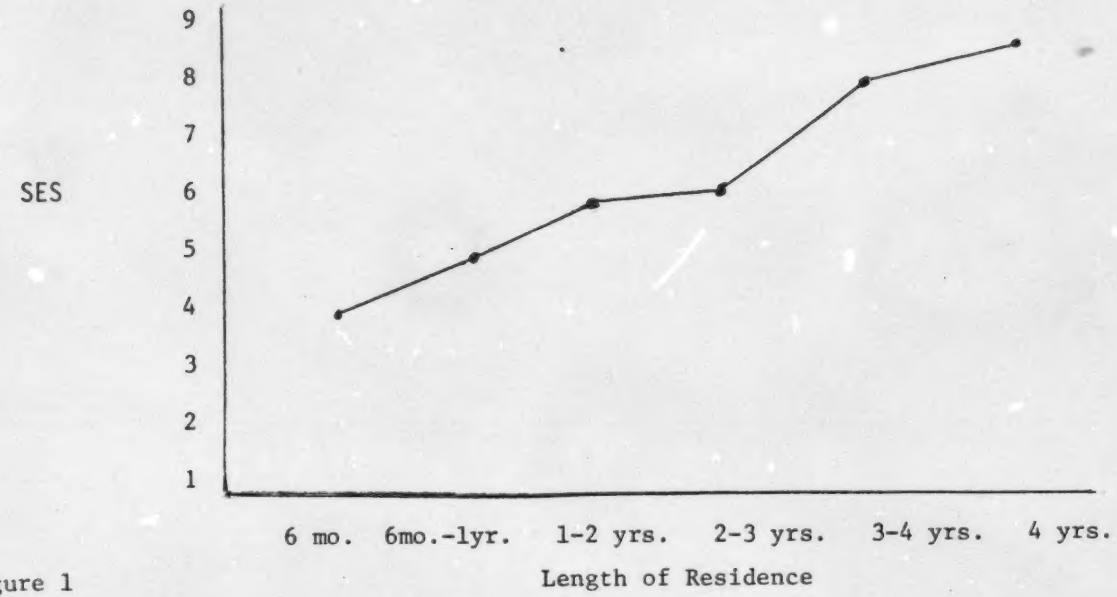

Figure 1

Socioeconomic Status by length of Residence in U.S.

Figure 2

Alienation by Length of Residence in the U.S.

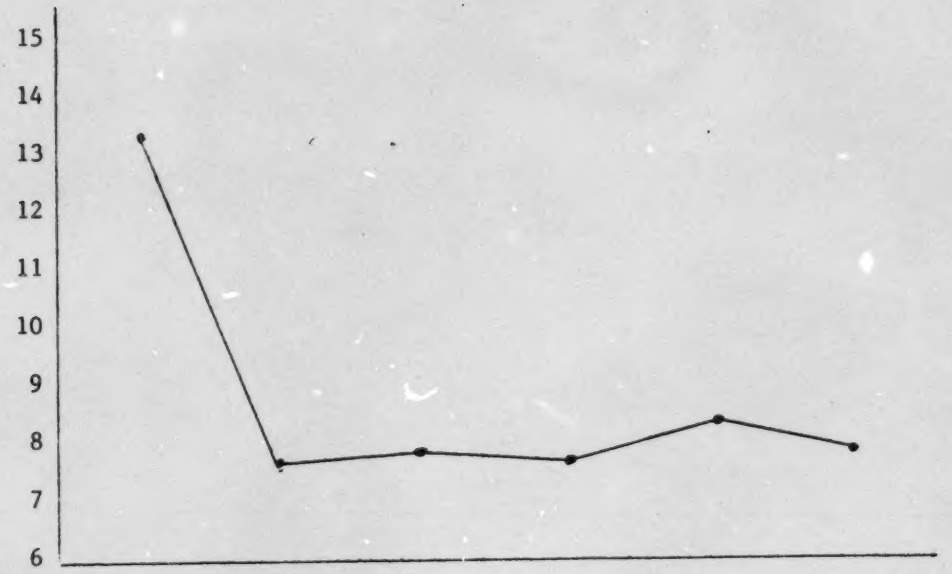

Figure 3

Self-American Difference by Lergth of Residence in U.S.

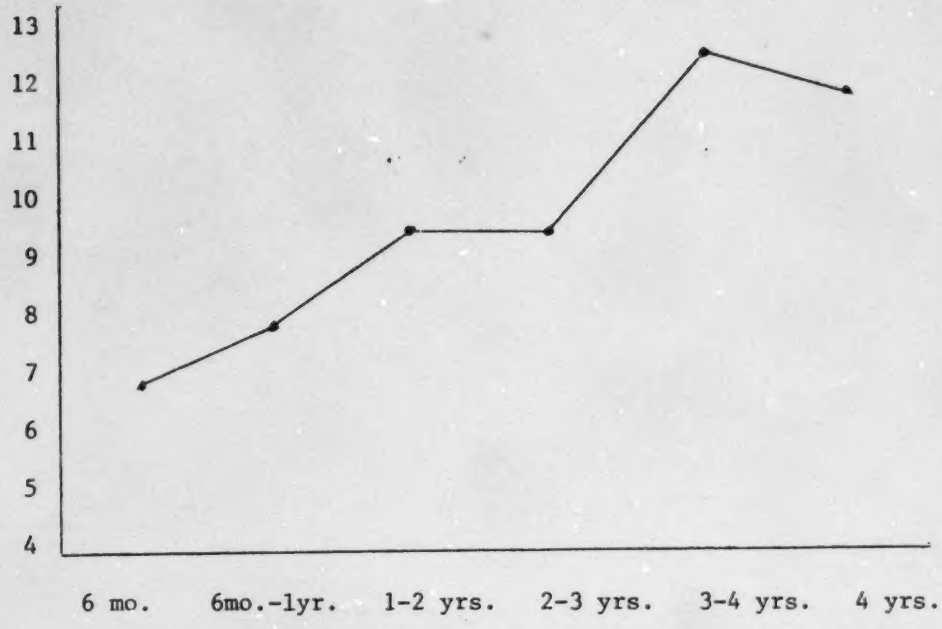

Figure 4

English Proficiency by Length of Residency in U.S.